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Daily Telegraph
17 May 1996
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Another 20,000 homes at risk from radon gas

By Charles Clover
Environment Editor

RADON, the radioactive gas thought to be responsible for 2,500 lung cancer deaths each year, affects a wider area of England than previously thought, the Department of the Environment said yesterday.

A new mapping exercise by the National Radiological Protection Board showed that of the 100,000 homes likely to be at risk, 20 per cent are outside previously identified radon areas.

Householders in the new regions are to be offered tests to see if they are being affected by the odourless gas, which is the second biggest cause of the disease after smoking.

The new areas, where more than one per cent of homes are expected to be above the Government's action level for radiation of 200 Becquerels per cubic meter of air, are: Avon, Cumbria, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northumberland, North Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, and Wiltshire.

In some, up to 30 per cent of homes are thought to be at risk. Mapping is still going on in Scotland and Wales.

The board has assured householders worried about the effect on property prices that the results of the radon test — which involves placing a small plastic container about the size of a door knob in a living room and a bedroom for three months — will be confidential.

The board can provide advice on how to deal with the gas. This is done by installing additional ventilation costing between £300 and £800.

Dr Geoff Kendall, from the board, said homes might still be at risk even if readings were below the "trigger" level as no radioactive substances were safe.

People outside the areas targeted by next month's tests can request one at a cost of £35.

Radon is derived from radium, itself a breakdown product of naturally occurring uranium and is found in small quantities in all rocks and soils. The gas disperses quickly in the open air but can accumulate in buildings.

There are marked variations between houses in the same street and the board says it is extremely difficult to identify which buildings are likely to be affected.

On past experience, the public, ever anxious about nuclear power stations and industrial emissions are notoriously apathetic when it comes to taking up free tests and advice, even within the worst affected areas of Cornwall, Devon and Somerset.

The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health yesterday accused the Government of ignoring warnings that radon was not confined to traditional hot-spots and demanded urgent action to deal with the health hazard.

Graham Jukes, director of professional services for CIEH, said: "Previous surveys carried out by the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health have indicated the potential existence of radon outside the areas which have already been identified.

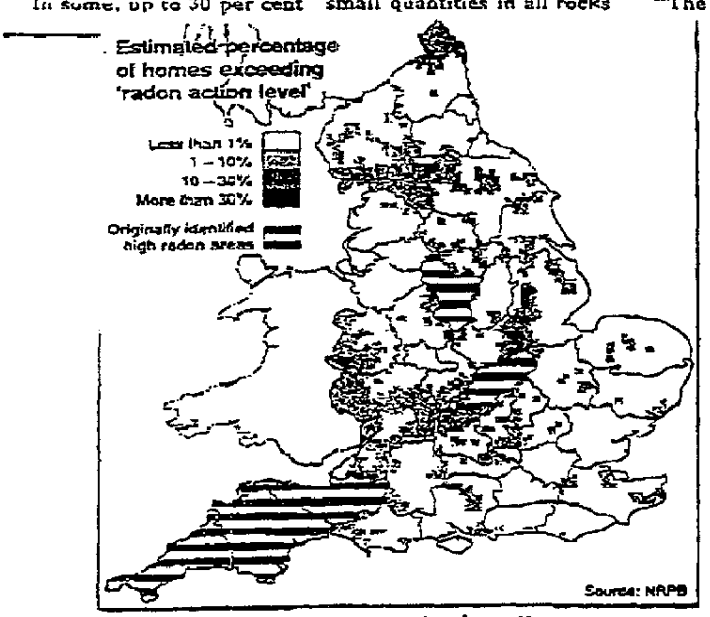
"The publication of this map highlights the Government's former complacency and vindicates the view of the CIEH of the need for an urgent strategy to deal with the real public health issue.

"In view of the public health significance, the CIEH questions whether it is enough for the Government to merely invite homes within affected areas to be part of the radon measurement exercise."

Mandatory help should be available to all homeowners with radon levels of more than 200 becquerels, they added.

"The Government has a responsibility to devise a measure which forces owners who are selling their homes to take necessary action in order that they do not pass the problem on, perpetuating the public health risk."

The Welsh Office will be offering free tests to households in Flintshire, Denbighshire, Powys, Anglesey, and Pembrokeshire this summer.



The radiological protection board's new map

PM3006509369

Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/ttgj0001

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New Scientist
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Smokescreen

PASSIVE smoking does not cause lung cancer, a panel of European scientists claim in a report published this week. The six-member panel was funded by the tobacco industry, but insists that this was on the understanding that it would be allowed to publish its findings, whatever they were.

Jeffrey Idle, professor of medicine at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, the panel's chairman, says that after reviewing all the literature the group concluded that "environmental tobacco smoke is not a primary lung carcinogen. There is no reason to believe that exposure to environmental tobacco smoke increases a person's risk of developing lung cancer."

This flatly contradicts the verdict by the US Environmental Protection Agency that around 3000 people die each year in the US alone from lung cancer caused by passive smoking. The EPA reached its verdict in 1993 after reviewing 30 studies comparing the incidence of lung cancer in non-smoking wives whose husbands smoked with those whose husbands did not smoke. It concluded that the women married to smokers were at greater risk of developing lung cancer.

The panel says that these studies reviewed by the EPA were flawed because they were not controlled or randomised.

However, Richard Peto, director of the Clinical Trial Service Unit at the University of Oxford, says: "The proof that passive smoking causes lung cancer is not epidemiological. It comes from the nature of the carcinogens in tobacco smoke."

Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/ttgj0001